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## Achaemenian Seals Found in Georgia

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### Abstract

In the article six Achaemenian seals are published, which were found in Georgia. Two of them belong to the seals of the "Oriental Royal Style" according to J. Boardman, the third is an "Occidental Royal Style" seal, one belongs to the "Greco-Oriental" group and two others to the "Beren group". Three of them were found in burials of the Roman period, two in burials of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, while the origin of the last one is unknown.

### Keywords

Seals / Achaemenian Art / Georgia

Uniformity of glyptics and art in general was not a characteristic feature of the Achaemenid Empire. Its huge territory was settled by various nations, all of them differed culturally from one another. The Achaemenian seals reflect this diversity – people of the eastern and western parts of the empire made them according to their traditions and artistic tastes. That is why they contrast not only by their forms and the images engraved on them, but also by their themes and styles.

Mesopotamian – Assyrian and Babylonian – influence dominated in the eastern part of the empire. As to the western areas, such as Asia Minor and the Aegean world, these were under the influence of the Greeks. J. Boardman has also stressed a strong influence of Greek artistic schools in the creation and further development of the Achaemenian glyptics in general. Research on epigraphic and archaeological data have already provided the grounds for a generally accepted opinion that Greek craftsmen were the people who made engraved pieces for Persian consumers according to Persians' tastes and demands.<sup>1</sup> But the eclectic Achaemenian art, with a number of details borrowed from different countries (Assyria, Babylon, Elam, Urartu, Greece, etc.), still remained an Iranian art.<sup>2</sup> The same is true for the Achaemenian glyptics.

<sup>1</sup> Boardman 1970, 303.

<sup>2</sup> Lukonin 1977, 72.

Boardman has offered a new interpretation for a number of problems connected with the interactions and mutual influence of Greek and Persian artistic schools. The scholar considers that it is hardly possible to draw a clear line between Greek and Persian styles in the Achaemenian seals.<sup>3</sup> Boardman has defined three main styles in Achaemenian glyptics: the Royal Style, including two subgroups – eastern and western, the Greek style, and the mixed style.<sup>4</sup>

The Achaemenian seals are of various forms: cylindrical, conical, pyramidal, scaraboid and many-sided (multi-facet). As for the material, the seals were normally made of chalcedony of different colours. The most popular among them was a pale-white and sky-blue sapphirin; agate and carnelian were rarely used.

Today we know six Achaemenian seals found in Georgia. In spite of their small quantity they clearly demonstrate the diverse character of the Achaemenian glyptic objects.

1. G. Gobeishvili found a cylindrical seal<sup>5</sup> of striped agate at Dzhoisubani village (Ratcha, Oni district) in 1962 (Fig. 1). The Tree of Life is depicted on the surface of the seal. The tree has a form of a tall, slim column resting upon a doubled base and crowned with a palm-like branch. A pair of winged, open-mouthed prancing lions are at both sides of the tree. One foreleg of each lion is uplifted and their tails are directed upward. Though the engraving is not deep, the representation is quite clear, plastic and accurate. The realistically portrayed strong, slender figures of the lions are similar to monumental sculptures.

The cylindrical form of the seal echoes the Mesopotamian objects. This form was created in northern Mesopotamia in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. Mesopotamian artisans found a special technique for long and narrow surfaces which included the whole scene they had intended to engrave. Each animal was depicted vertically, likewise an upright standing person.<sup>6</sup> A cylindrical form was adopted by the Persians in the Achaemenian period and the craftsmen, who normally had followed Assyrian and Babylonian subject matters, borrowed this ancient method in arranging the figures, but at the same time changed the tradition of many-figured scenes characteristic to Mesopotamian cylindrical seals. As a result, their design obtained a kind of monumental impression.<sup>7</sup>

Cylinder seals were common in the eastern part of the Persian Empire. In the western part pyramidal, conical, scarab-shaped and many-sided seals were

<sup>3</sup> Boardman 1970, 303.

<sup>4</sup> Boardman 1970, 305-322.

<sup>5</sup> GF No. 1241, dimensions: 26 × 11 mm (here and in other cases GF means "Glyptics Fund" of the Archaeological Department of the State Museum of Georgia).

<sup>6</sup> Mat'e, Afanas'eva *et alii* 1968, 51.

<sup>7</sup> Mat'e, Afanas'eva *et alii* 1968, 90.

more popular, which were also much easier to use.<sup>8</sup> Boardman supposes that cylindrical seals were considered as official ones used by the imperial officials. Besides this, he believes that a group of Greek artists kept making them until the end of the empire, in spite of the fact that such seals had lost their popularity.<sup>9</sup>

The subject matter represented on the Dzhoisubani cylinder seal (the Tree of Life and the animals standing at both sides) is of an ancient, eastern Mesopotamian origin. This motive is often represented in the Achaemenian art, including cylinder seals.<sup>10</sup>

There are many dozens of versions of the Tree of Life. Similar trees, in a form of a column crowned with different plants and the branches of palm-trees, had been quite common on Assyrian cylinders.<sup>11</sup>

As to the Dzhoisubani example, it belongs to the style defined by Boardman as the "Oriental Royal Style" (*i.e.* his group 1); this group includes cylinder and conical seals on which Assyrian and Babylonian elements predominate. From an artistic point of view the style of the seal representations reminds of the Achaemenian palace monuments.<sup>12</sup> It should be dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC or even a little earlier.

2. One of the burials (No. 8) excavated by I. Gagoshidze in 1996 in Takhtisdziri village (Kartli, Kareli district) yielded a conical dark sky-blue, even violet, chalcedony seal (Fig. 2).<sup>13</sup> It has a slightly outward swelling surface and represents a stylized Tree of Life and a pair of wild goats standing on their hind legs to both sides of the tree. The Tree of Life consists of branches arranged in three tiers. The rods of the branches are directed downwards, then turned upwards and are crowned with a fir-cone or some other fruit. A four-petalled flower at the bottom of each branch is visible. The upper part of the rod has the form of a palm-tree branch with a crescent crown. The engraving is not deep but at the same time it is fairly clear, plastic and neat. The wild goats' bodies are oblong and anatomically exact. Their muscles are neat; their long horns are beautifully bent, as are their joints and hooves. All the parts of the Tree of Life – its branches, flowers, fir-cone, are engraved perfectly. On the whole the seal is a real masterpiece.

<sup>8</sup> Boardman 1970, 323.

<sup>9</sup> Boardman 1970, 309, 324.

<sup>10</sup> Lukonin 1977, 72.

<sup>11</sup> Parpola 1993, 162, fig. 1,2; 201, fig. 163, 164.

<sup>12</sup> Boardman 1970, 305.

<sup>13</sup> GF No. 1450, dimensions: edge – 23 × 20 mm; height – 32 mm.

As I have already noted, the subject consisting of the Tree of Life and animals at both of its sides is widely spread in Oriental art.<sup>14</sup> Trees similar to the Takhtisdziri example are quite common on Assyrian seals as well.<sup>15</sup>

The conical seals appeared in the 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC in Mesopotamia, in the Neo-Babylonian Kingdom.<sup>16</sup> Later this form of seals was adopted by the Achaemenians.

Motives and styles of Mesopotamian glyptics were used on both Achaemenian cylinder and conical seals.<sup>17</sup> This is the reason why Boardman included both the Achaemenian cylinder and conical seals in his group of "Oriental Royal Style". The style of the Takhtisdziri seal, like the stile of Dzhoisubani cylinder seal allows us to interpret it as belonging to this group.

There is a conical chalcedony seal displayed at the Munich State Museum of Numismatics which also represents caprids stylistically very close to the Takhtisdziri example.<sup>18</sup> The former is dating from the earlier half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC which allows us to date the Takhtisdziri conical seal to the same period.

3. A pyramidal dull-white chalcedony seal<sup>19</sup> was found in a rich tomb (No. 905) at Mtskheta (Kartli) in 1985 (Fig. 3).<sup>20</sup> It has a slightly swollen surface representing a winged divinity with a cogged crown on the head and grasping the tails of a pair of winged, open-mouthed lions with their heads turned backwards. The image is strictly symmetric as if reflected in a mirror. Though the creatures are not engraved deeply, the outline of each of them is fairly clear. The wings of the divinity and the lions, and also the manes of the latter, are similar, drawn by fine, parallel lines. The figures are somewhat flat and roughly modeled. Pyramidal seals were created in the Neo-Babylonian Kingdom in the 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. In the Achaemenian period seals of this type were widespread mostly in Asia Minor.<sup>21</sup> They mainly come from Sardis, from other towns of Anatolia and the Greek islands.<sup>22</sup>

Boardman has included some of the pyramidal seals in the group of the "Occidental Royal Style".<sup>23</sup> Some scholars believe that the Occidental Royal Style is a simplified, somewhat artificial version of the "Oriental Royal Style".

<sup>14</sup> Porada 1952, 182, pl. 29, 4; Lukonin 1977, 72.

<sup>15</sup> Parpola 1993, 201, fig. 452, 490, 498, 502.

<sup>16</sup> Mat'e, Afanas'eva *et alii* 1968, 84.

<sup>17</sup> Boardman 1970, 304.

<sup>18</sup> AGDS, 54, No. 247, pl. 27.

<sup>19</sup> GF No. 1579, dimensions: edge – 20 × 15 mm, height – 26 mm.

<sup>20</sup> Apakidze & Nikolaishvili, 1994, 36-37, pl. 40, 2,3,4; pl. 56, 1,2.

<sup>21</sup> Lukonin 1977, 72.

<sup>22</sup> Boardman 1970, 323.

<sup>23</sup> Boardman 1970, 305.

The images of the former are rougher and less modeled. Their themes are purely Iranian (differing from the Mesopotamian themes of cylinder and conical seals). They mostly represent Persian kings or heroes, often with cogged crowns or tiaras on their heads, usually fighting with lions or other beasts or dragons.<sup>24</sup>

A number of exact parallels for the Mtskheta seal are made of the same material, having the same form, theme and style. In most cases these are pyramidal seals, for example a pair of chalcedony ones from the Munich State Museum of Numismatics.<sup>25</sup> Their images and subjects are almost the same as on the Mtskheta example. One of them (No. 236) is even stylistically identical. Both seals date from the earlier half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>26</sup>

A carnelian pyramidal seal kept in the Geneva Museum of Fine Arts and History bears the same representation and M. L. Vollenweider considers it to originate from Syria or from Asia Minor. It is dated to the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.<sup>27</sup> The same scene is depicted on a pyramidal chalcedony seal from the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin.<sup>28</sup>

It has to be noted that the lions represented on the seals are very similar to those portrayed on the Archaic Greek scarabs. Their style and the way of treatment are identical as well. While discussing the Archaic Greek scarabs found in Cyprus, Boardman pointed out that the stylization characteristic for such seals had developed further in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and it appeared on the Achaemenian seals.<sup>29</sup> I suppose that the Mtskheta pyramidal seal may easily be dated to the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> and the earlier half of the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.

4. A tabloid chalcedony seal<sup>30</sup> was found by V. Nikolaishvili in burial No. 21 of the Baiatkheli site in 1982 (Mtskheta, East Georgia, the area in the north of the Samtavro valley).<sup>31</sup> Different images are engraved on each of four sides of the seal. Its lower wide side presents a Persian warrior thrusting a javelin into a prancing lion (Figs. 4, 5). The warrior wears a Persian hood, a jacket tightly fitted at his waist and shoes with long sharp toes. His horse is rearing and its long tail is not tied in the Persian manner. The upper, smaller side of the seal shows a Maltese dog terrier. One of the side facets bears a

<sup>24</sup> Boardman 1970, 305.

<sup>25</sup> AGDS, Nos. 236, 237, pl. 26.

<sup>26</sup> AGDS, 52-53.

<sup>27</sup> Vollenweider 1967, 79, pl. 40, No. 89.

<sup>28</sup> Jakob-Rost 1997, pl. 102, fig. 475; pl. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Boardman 1968, 133, pl. 31, 442, 443; pl. 32, 461, 462.

<sup>30</sup> The seal is preserved at the Mtskheta State Museum, No. 101-35-108; dimensions: edge – 23 × 18 mm; height – 12 mm.

<sup>31</sup> Nikolaishvili & Giunashvili 1995, 120, fig. 977-981, 1218.

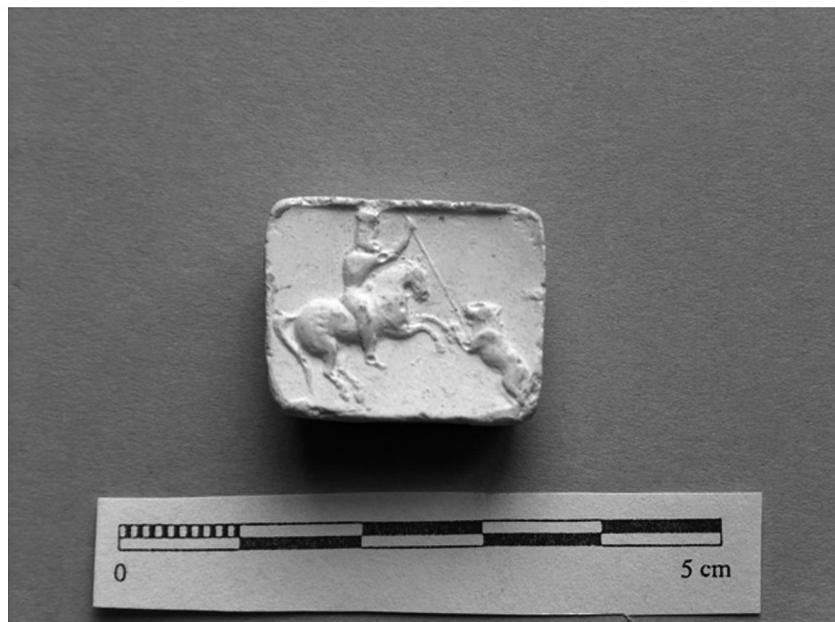


Fig. 5. Tabloid seal from Baiatkhevi (Mtskheta). Lower side. Impression.

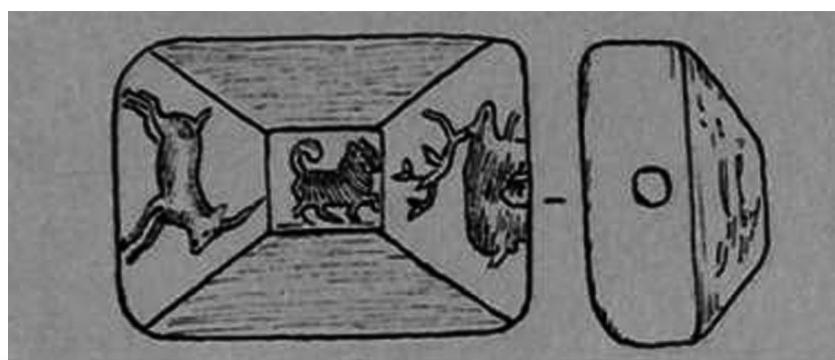


Fig. 7. Tabloid seal from Baiatkhevi (Mtskheta). Upper side

galloping stag with antlers and the other an antelope (Figs. 6, 7). The central picture *i.e.* the warrior fighting with the lion is carved deep. Both figures are clear, quite plastic and realistic, though the movements seem somehow static. The same can be said about the other engraved figures on the other sides of the seal. The animals are realistic and each of their parts is clearly worked out but the movement of galloping seems rather constrained.

Tabloid seals had originated in Anatolia.<sup>32</sup> They belong to the so called “Greco-Persian” or “Greco-Oriental” group.<sup>33</sup> This group of seals mainly consists of scarabs and the number of tabloid ones is low. “Greco-Persian” seals have attracted the scholars’ special interest since a long time. A. Furtwängler was the first who singled out a group of seals and called them “Greco-Persian”. He described them and dated them to the later half of the 5<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>34</sup> He believed that the “Greco-Persian” seals were created by Ionian Greek artisans who worked at the Persian Royal palace and produced them for local consumers, taking into consideration the tastes and demands of their clients.

Some scholars, like H. Walters<sup>35</sup> or G. Richter,<sup>36</sup> have agreed with Furtwängler’s opinion, but others, like T. Knipovich,<sup>37</sup> M. Maximova,<sup>38</sup> H. Seyrig<sup>39</sup> and M. Lordkipanidze<sup>40</sup> have offered another interpretation – they believed that “Greco-Persian” seals were made by Persian craftsmen influenced by Greek art. N. Nikulina supposes that the “Greco-Persian” seals originated on the base of local art from Asia Minor and were greatly influenced by both Greeks and Persians.<sup>41</sup>

Later Boardman has changed the term “Greco-Persian” into “Greco-Oriental”<sup>42</sup> and included the seals into his so called “group of Mixed Style”. The scholar believes that both Greek and Persian craftsmen took equal part in the creation of these seals and, going further, he thinks that the majority of the seals do not seem to have been made by Greeks.<sup>43</sup> It is of course true that the Greek influence upon the representations of “Greco-Persian” seals is clearly

<sup>32</sup> Boardman 1970, 324.

<sup>33</sup> Boardman 1990, 401.

<sup>34</sup> Furtwängler 1900, 116.

<sup>35</sup> Walters 1926, XXXII.

<sup>36</sup> Richter 1946, 15-80.

<sup>37</sup> Knipovich 1926, 57-58.

<sup>38</sup> Maximova 1928, 663, 676-677.

<sup>39</sup> Seyrig 1952, 199-201.

<sup>40</sup> Lordkipanidze 1963, 135-137.

<sup>41</sup> Nikulina 1968, 20.

<sup>42</sup> Boardman 1990, 401.

<sup>43</sup> Boardman 1970, 324.

seen, but at the same time it is quite possible that there were a number of skilled Persian craftsmen who were able to imitate a Greek theme or style quite masterly. As to Greek craftsmen, they, in their turn, had to take into account Persian consumers' demands and especially the taste of the satraps of the western provinces.<sup>44</sup> The principal thing that Greek masters contributed as their own aspect in the making of "Greco-Persian" seals was an easy and accurate manner of distributing the figures within a space and a realistic, anatomically correct rendition of each image.<sup>45</sup> The scholar believes that the western part of Asia Minor and Cyprus were the main areas where the Greeks' and the Persians' interests met and from where, during the period between the later half of the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, the "Greco-Persian" seals spread over the territory from the Aegean world up to India and from the Black Sea region up to the Nile river.<sup>46</sup>

The Mtskheta many-sided seal is not the only example of this type. Similar forms, design and even the style were quite common (the majority are represented on scarabs, since tabloid seals are considerably rarer). The theme of such seals was not diversified. There are a number of them representing Persian riders or infantrymen (and not the kings represented on "Occidental Royal Style" pyramidal seals) dressed exactly like the warrior represented on the Baiatkheli example, fighting against a beast with a javelin or with a bow and arrow, or against a Greek warrior.<sup>47</sup> There are numerous seals with animal images on them; often the animals are galloping (a deer,<sup>48</sup> Maltese dog terrier,<sup>49</sup> etc.). All these images, like the Baiatkheli one, are realistic but even dynamic figures are lifeless and this feature is normally characteristic for the "Greco-Persian" seal impressions.<sup>50</sup>

A generally accepted date of "Greco-Persian" seals is the later half of the 5<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.

5. Georgian National Museum purchased grave goods found by chance at Dzhimiti village (Kakheti, Gurjaani district) in 2000. The assemblage included a scaraboid<sup>51</sup> of a light yellowish-white, half-transparent chalcedony (Fig. 8). It represents a horseman wearing a pointed hat and grasping a javelin.

<sup>44</sup> Boardman 1970, 304, 312-313, 323.

<sup>45</sup> Boardman 1970, 334.

<sup>46</sup> Boardman 1970, 303.

<sup>47</sup> Maximova 1928, fig. 9, 15, 16; Richter 1968, fig. 496; Boardman 1970, fig. 886, 888, 889, 925, 927, 929, etc.

<sup>48</sup> Boardman 1970, fig. 896, 940.

<sup>49</sup> Boardman 1970, fig. 874, 966; AGDS, pl. 28, 449 k; pl. 32, 271 A.

<sup>50</sup> Maximova 1928, 655, 658.

<sup>51</sup> GF, No. 1438; dimensions: rim – 22 × 18 mm; height – 7 mm.

He is fighting with a long horned bull. The picture is schematic, its details are not clear, the figures are flat, not solid. The seal has oriental features.

The form and the theme of the Dzhimiti seal is quite common among the so called "Greco-Persian" seals but because of its small size and especially its schematic depiction it completely differs from the so called Classical "Greco-Persian" large scaraboids which are greatly influenced by Greek art.

The Dzhimiti example belongs to the so called seals of the "Bern Group"<sup>52</sup> which has been singled out by Boardman as a separate group inside the "Greco-Persian" ones. The scholar says that the characteristic features of such small scaraboids and tabloid seals are the following: they are less detailed, their style is much more Persian than Greek, and they belong to the further stage of the Achaemenian period continuing the traditions of the "Greco-Persian" series of seals. Their images have many points of similarity with the ones represented on Seleucid clay bulae and consequently they have to be dated to the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC or even the following period.<sup>53</sup>

One fact should be stressed here: Boardman has re-dated "Bern Group" seals and placed them to a later period than the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, while there had already been a generally accepted date for the "Greco-Persian" seals in the later half of the 5<sup>th</sup> and the earlier half of the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. Boardman believes that the seals of such type have remained more persistent in the provinces of the Achaemenian Empire. Such would be the "Bern Group" seals which have been connected by him with blue glass tabloids found in Georgia by the author.

6. A small scaraboid<sup>54</sup> of dull-white transparent-striped chalcedony, supposedly found on the territory of the Bolnisi district (Fig. 9).

A flat surface of the seal represents an open-mouthed lion attacking an animal (a doe?). The image is rough and flat. The figures are schematic, only the lion's mane is rendered with a pair of small triangles. Its claws are represented with three oblong triangles. According to the theme and style the seal probably belongs to the "Bern Group" (compare the lion's figure with the one represented on a jasper scaraboid belonging to the same "Bern Group").<sup>55</sup> The seal may be dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC or even to a later period.

Examination of the seals found in Georgia is of particular interest but not only from the point of view of studying Achaemenian glyptics. It is

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Boardman 1970, fig. 973, 974; the seal No. 973 is dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC or even later period: Boardman & Vollenweider 1978, 45-46, fig. 200, pl. 35, 200.

<sup>53</sup> Boardman 1970, 320-322.

<sup>54</sup> GF, No. 1588, dimensions: 15 × 13 mm; height – 6 mm.

<sup>55</sup> Boardman 1970, fig. 975.



Fig. 9. Scaraboid from Bolnisi. Impression.

also interesting concerning the interrelations between Georgia and the Achaemenian world. It seems worth pointing out that among the Achaemenian seals found in Georgia there are three pieces (Mtskheta's pyramidal seal, Baiatkhevi tabloid and Dzhimiti scaraboid) which come from Roman period burials. The Dzhoisubani cylinder seal was found in a burial dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and the Takhtisdziri conical one was found in one of the burials that had been unearthed at the cemetery dating from the 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC. All of these contexts belong to the later period and this very fact should be taken into consideration by the scholars studying contacts between Georgia and the Achaemenian world. It should be mentioned here that not only imported Achaemenian seals were found in the Eastern Georgia, but also numerous finds of locally manufactured seals of the Achaemenian cultural circle are known in this region (for example, finger-rings with metal bezels of the 4<sup>th</sup> or

3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC from Akhalgori, Kanchaeti, Takhtisdziri; blue glass tabloids of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC up to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD from Mtskheta-Samtavro, Neron-Deresi, Lochini, Urbnisi, Arkneti).

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## Abbreviations:

- AA* Archäologischer Anzeiger (Berlin).  
*AGDS* Antike Gemmen in Deutschen Sammlungen. Bd. 1, Teil 1 (Munich 1968).  
*AJ* The Antiquaries Journal (London).

- AJA American Journal of Archaeology (New York).  
GE Gosudarstvennyi Èrmitazh (Leningrad, St.-Petersburg).  
GF Gliptics Fund of the Georgian National Muzeum (Tbilisi).  
JNES Journal of the Near Eastern Studies (Chicago).  
SMGM Sazogadoebriv Metsnierebata Gankopilebis Moambe (Tbilisi).

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